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PROBABLE DEVELOPMENTS IN LAOS TO JULY 1956

Submitted by the

DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate: The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and The Joint Staff.

Concurred in by the

INTELLIGENCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

on 20 December 1955. Concurring were the Special Assistant, Intelligence, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, Department of the Army; the Director of Naval Intelligence; the Director of Intelligence, USAF; and the Deputy Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the IAC and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

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PROBABLE DEVELOPMENTS IN LAOS TO JULY 1956

THE PROBLEM

To estimate probable trends in relations between the Royal government and the Pathet Lao over the next six months with particular reference to the military intentions and capabilities of the two sides. (A discussion of the political, economic, and military situation in Laos is contained in NIE 63.3–55, dated 26 July 1955. The present paper updates the basic discussion of Royal government-Pathet Lao capabilities, and the activities of the International Control Commission. Although the conclusions of NIE 63.3–55 remain valid in all important respects, this estimate provides further elaboration of its conclusions, particularly paragraph 6.)

CONCLUSIONS

1. The government of Laos is concerned that unless it soon suppresses the Pathet Lao a de facto partitioning of the country may occur. It is becoming increasingly impatient with a policy of inaction as a result of prolonged and fruitless negotiations with the Pathet Lao. However, the Royal government could probably be induced to postpone action for some time as a result of pressures from the Western Powers or the International Control Commission, and in the belief that Pathet Lao morale is declining. Its eventual course is likely to be influenced largely by its ability to obtain reliable air transport and by its estimates of the Viet Minh reaction and the prospects for US or SEATO support. However, even lack of airlift or Western support may not deter the Royal government from launching an offensive. (*Paras. 10, 23–24*)

2. We believe that against Pathet forces alone, Royal government forces have the capability to contain Pathet attacks and, with adequate air transport, to occupy the main centers and lines of communication in the provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly. (*Para. 17*)

3. We believe that the Communists are determined to maintain their position in Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces, and that Viet Minh troops will intervene to the extent necessary to maintain the Pathet Lao. Following the 25 December elections, which it is boycotting as illegal, the Pathet Lao may formalize its separate status by setting up a government in its areas of control. However, a serious Pathet Lao effort to drive the Royal troops out of Phong Saly and Sam Neua provinces appears inconsistent with general Communist policy in Asia, since it would require participation in combat areas of Viet Minh forces which would be susceptible to detection. Nevertheless, Pathet Lao-Viet Minh forces might undertake such action in view of the probable Communist estimate that military action limited to the two disputed

provinces will not elicit effective Western reaction and might therefore demonstrate to the Thai and South Vietnamese that SEATO is an uncertain guarantee against Communist military pressure and subversion. (*Paras. 16, 21*)

4. We believe that, under the circumstances now existing, the most likely development will be a gradual build-up in the scale and intensity of hostilities in northern Laos over the next six months. There appears to be little likelihood of an effective cease-fire. Each side will attempt to consolidate and extend its position; but, barring unauthorized action by Royal Lao military commanders, neither side is likely to launch a large-scale offensive. There will probably be an increase in the size of the forces involved, including increased Viet Minh support of the Pathet Lao. In this situation there will be serious danger of sizeable Royal Lao forces being cut off and captured by more experienced Pathet-Viet Minh formations. The government might then feel compelled to request military assistance from SEATO or the US to maintain its position in the disputed provinces and to prevent a decline in anti-Pathet resolution throughout Laos. (*Para. 27*)

5. If increased military action led to a defeat for Royal government forces or their ejection from the disputed provinces, morale in the rest of Laos, particularly in government circles, would decline. The Thai might feel that failure to suppress the Pathet was due in part to indecision by the US; and, barring a US security commitment, concern over their own security would increase. South Vietnamese apprehensions would also increase, although Diem would feel that Communist violations of the Geneva Agreements would reduce foreign criticism of his refusal to discuss elections with the Viet Minh. India's acquiescence in the de facto partitioning of Laos might be interpreted by the Communists as evidence that Nehru was unwilling to make an issue of gradual Communist advances in Southeast Asia. The Communists and some Southeast Asian governments would also tend to conclude that SEATO was not prepared to act. (*Para. 28*)

6. In the event of large-scale hostilities, the ICC would probably demand a cease-fire with a withdrawal of both sides to previously held positions. The question of which side initiated fighting must inevitably be hazy under circumstances prevailing in the area. The Indian ICC representatives will almost certainly insist that the status quo be preserved in the two provinces until the two sides are able to reach an agreed political settlement. The Indians remain sensitive to US involvement and would probably construe any US supply operations to Lao forces in the two provinces, under conditions of enlarged fighting, as violations of the Geneva Agreements. (*Para. 29*)

DISCUSSION

I. CURRENT SITUATION

7. The Geneva Agreements of 1954 proclaimed the territorial integrity of Laos and recognized the sovereignty of the Royal Laotian government over the entire territory. The agreements provided, however, for the grouping of Pathet Lao fighting units in the two northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam

Neua, pending the reintegration of such units into the national community. The Royal government pledged not to permit the introduction of foreign troops or establishment of bases, beyond existing arrangements with France, or to adhere to alliances "so long as its security is not threatened." Although Laos is within the area of the SEATO guarantees, it is not a member of the pact and has thus far preferred to rely on the International Control Commission rather than SEATO to deal with the Pathet Lao problem.

8. Following the regroupment of Pathet Lao units in the fall of 1954, the Royal government sought by direct negotiations with the Pathet Lao to secure entry for and recognition of government administrators in the Pathet groupment area. Meanwhile the government increased the strength of its armed forces already in the Pathet Lao area. The Pathets, allegedly because of the absence of a political settlement, have denied Royal jurisdiction in the north; and frequent armed clashes occurred as the Pathets sought to maintain a secure base.

9. Partly because of Premier Katay's belief that the Pathets could be persuaded to cast off their Viet Minh leadership and return to the fold, partly because of pressure from the ICC, the UK, and France, and partly because of basic military deficiencies, the Royal government prolonged the political negotiations and continued its efforts to arrange an acceptable cease-fire within Sam Neua and Phong Saly. Its latest effort to demonstrate good faith in negotiation led to inconclusive meetings with the Pathet Lao leader Souphannouvong during October in Rangoon.

10. It became increasingly evident to the Royal government, however, that political negotiations were fruitless and that the real Pathet Lao objective was the establishment of a secure base for the eventual subversion or overrunning of all Laos. The government finally declared on 10 November 1955 that further negotiations appeared futile, and announced its intention to proceed with national elections in December in all areas under its control. Since that time government leaders, particularly among the military, have increasingly turned their attention to the possibilities of forceful action to re-establish Royal government authority in the north. There may be a feeling in Laos that unless the Pathets are eliminated there will be a tendency among the great powers to accept a de facto partition of their country.

11. More recently, the Royal government has reported increased Pathet military activity, which it regards as preparatory for an offensive. The Pathet Lao actually conducted a large probing attack against Royal Laotian forces in Sam Neua province on 5 December, and it is possible that the Pathets intend a series of attacks against Royal forces within Phong Saly and Sam Neua in the near future.

12. In the event of major hostilities the Pathet Lao could employ their 6,300 regular troops, comprising 11 infantry battalions and one heavy weapons battalion. These are supported by up to 1,000 Viet Minh "advisers," and by a local militia totalling up to 3,000 partially armed troops. Two-thirds of the Pathet Lao regular forces are deployed in Sam Neua province, where seven infantry battalions and the heavy weapons battalion are located. The other four infantry battalions and other detachments, totalling about 1,900 troops, are in Phong Saly province. A total of 18,000 Viet Minh troops, comprising two infantry regiments, a border security regiment, and one infantry division, are deployed in North Vietnam along routes leading into northern Laos. These units could be moved into northern Laos with little or no advance warning.

13. Pathet Lao units are lightly armed, mobile, and effective in the guerrilla tactics particularly suited to the terrain of northern Laos. There are firm indications that Pathet Lao morale is deteriorating and that economic and health conditions in their zone are appreciably poorer than in the rest of Laos. The Communists appear to have little spontaneous popular support, and there may have been some low-echelon friction between Pathet Lao troops and their Viet Minh advisers. These factors are probably compensated for in part by intensive Communist indoctrination and firm discipline. On balance, the Pathet Lao

troops are probably on a par qualitatively with those of the Lao National Army. The combat effectiveness of any Viet Minh forces which might be committed in northern Laos would be superior to that of the Pathet Lao because of their better armament, battle experience, and indoctrination.

14. The Pathet Lao military forces are effectively controlled by the Viet Minh, and the Pathet Lao almost certainly would not undertake any major offensive action without Viet Minh, and ultimately Chinese Communist, approval. In addition to advisory personnel, the Viet Minh provides the Pathet Lao with weapons, probably including some artillery, and furnishes ammunition and other equipment on a continuing basis from depots in the Dien Bien Phu, Moc Chau, and Hoi Xuan areas. There are no indications that Chinese Communist personnel are with the Pathet Lao forces, but minor Chinese Communist logistical support may be directly available to the Pathet Lao in Phong Saly province. Frequent reports of Viet Minh units in the Pathet Lao area remain unconfirmed, but small Viet Minh detachments may be deployed along lines of communication into both provinces, and in major rear depot areas.

15. Royal government forces total 27,700 of of which 25,000 are in the Lao National Army (ANL), and 2,700 in the Lao National Guard. The army is composed of 16 infantry battalions, 1 parachute infantry battalion, 1 artillery training battalion, 2 armored reconnaissance companies, and 35 commando companies. Almost two-thirds of the regular army units and more than half of the National Guard companies are deployed in northern Laos. In Phong Saly province, there are six commando companies plus some 3,000–4,000 partially armed progovernment partisans. These could be supported by the 3 infantry battalions, 1 commando company, and 5 National Guard companies located in Luang Prabang province. There are five infantry battalions and 14 commando companies, a total of 5,200 troops, in Sam Neua province, with the parachute battalion, three commando companies, and three National Guard companies in adjacent Xieng Khouang province. Three battalions each are located in central and southern Laos.

16. The ANL has no permanent tactical organization above battalion level and no combat-ready heavy weapons or artillery units. It is understaffed, inexperienced, and dependent on French advisers and other foreign assistance for training and maintenance of equipment. The over-all performance of units in combat has been uneven. Morale is only fair despite a frequently aggressive outlook within the youthful officer corps. The army is almost completely dependent on air transport to resupply its forces in the disputed provinces. There are now available to the Royal government only nine C–47's, all of which are operated by French crews and four of which were allocated to the French under MDAP. In the event of generalized hostilities in these provinces the French would almost certainly withdraw their air support unless the French became involved through SEATO. The military position of the Royal government would be improved if arrangements work out for reliable air transport.

17. We believe that against Pathet forces alone Royal government forces have the capability to contain Pathet attacks and, with adequate air transport, to occupy the main centers and lines of communication in the provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly. However, we believe that if the Pathet position should be seriously threatened by Royal government attacks, or by the undermining of the Pathet Lao organization, the Viet Minh would almost certainly intervene to the extent necessary to preserve the Pathet Lao.

18. Viet Minh intervention would be difficult to identify in the guerrilla-type warfare that would take place in the difficult terrain of northern Laos. If the Viet Minh did intervene, large numbers of Royal troops could be cut off and captured in these areas. In such an event, the government would probably feel compelled eventually to request military assistance from the US or SEATO. Only visible evidence of SEATO or US intention to intervene would be likely to induce the Viet Minh to abandon military support of the Pathet Lao.

19. The International Control Commission has long encouraged the Royal government to continue political negotiations with the Pathet in the hopes of avoiding a military showdown. As the prospects for Pathet Lao acceptance of Royal authority and an agreement on terms for Pathet Lao participation in the December national elections have dwindled, the Indian chairman of the ICC has become increasingly reconciled to a de facto partitioning of Laos. The Canadian member continues to support the Royal government's right to jurisdiction over the disputed territory. The British and French, both of whom are able to influence Laotian leaders, are also strongly opposed to military action by the Royal government. Although they recognize that unless the Pathet Lao is suppressed, it will probably eventually emerge as a rival claimant to power over all Laos, they prefer this delayed threat to the immediate prospect of an armed conflict that might force SEATO to intervene or be discredited. The Indians feel that to make an issue of Pathet violation of the Geneva Accords would be inconsistent with failure to make an issue of Diem's refusal to open face-to-face consultations with the Viet Minh, and the British are influenced by the Indian and Communist linking of the two issues. Among all these states there is a pervading desire not to permit the Laos issue to boil over and interfere with prospects for reducing tensions in the Far East.

II. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

20. The relative military weakness of the Pathet Lao and the probable reluctance of the Viet Minh to become engaged on such a scale as to risk SEATO or US intervention will probably serve to limit Communist military action to the disputed provinces of Laos. A continuation and expansion of local Pathet Lao attacks appears likely over the next few months. Such attacks might be designed to increase pressure for a resumption of negotiations, to raise the morale of their own forces, to counter the activities of government forces, or to underline Pathet Lao claims that the December election is illegal in the absence of a political settlement. Following the elections, which it is boycotting, the Pathet Lao may formalize its separate status by setting up a government in its areas of control. The Communists may also anticipate an eventual stiffening of the Western position in Laos and may desire to consolidate their own position before effective Western measures to bolster the Royal government can be implemented.

21. A serious Pathet Lao effort to drive the Royal troops out of Phong Saly and Sam Neua provinces appears inconsistent with general Communist policy in Asia, since it would require participation of Viet Minh forces in combat which would be susceptible to detection. However, Pathet Lao-Viet Minh forces might undertake such action in view of the probable Communist estimate that military action limited to the two northern provinces will not elicit effective Western reaction and might therefore demonstrate to the Thai and South Vietnamese that SEATO is an uncertain guarantee against Communist military pressure and subversion.

22. The failure of the Royal government to seize the opportunity offered by the recent Pathet Lao attack to undertake a general offensive indicates that no such action is contemplated at least until after the elections on 25 December. The outcome of these elections is uncertain, beyond the probability that few candidates subject to Pathet Lao influence will be elected. Following the election, problems of party alignments and personal position may occupy the attention of government leaders for a brief period. However, concern with the Pathet Lao problem is almost certain again to become paramount. Basic government policy towards the Pathet Lao is unlikely to be affected by the election, although a diminution in Premier Katay's influence might result in a bolder policy.

23. If the Pathets do not launch an offensive, pressures from the Western Powers and the ICC plus the belief that Pathet Lao morale is declining, would probably induce the Laotian government to postpone action. We believe, however, that the Royal government will become increasingly impatient with a policy of inaction. Its eventual course of action is likely to be influenced largely by its ability to obtain reliable air transport from US or

other sources, and its estimate both of Viet Minh reactions and of the likelihood of US or SEATO support.

24. However, even lack of Western support or airlift may not deter the Royal government from launching an offensive. They might believe that Viet Minh intervention, if it occurred, would not extend beyond restoration of the Pathet position, and would have consequences no more serious than would a policy of inaction. They might hope that the Viet Minh could be forced to expose their role in the maintenance of the Pathet movement. In addition, they could claim that Pathet Lao action had grossly violated the Geneva Agreements. They could then request the Geneva co-chairmen to act to preserve the territorial integrity of Laos; and even call upon SEATO or the US for direct military assistance.

25. Finally, given the presence of opposing forces without a defined front in the disputed provinces and the inadequacy of communications, it is possible that an action intended as a reconnaissance or a relocation of forces could be interpreted by the other side as a deliberate provocation and thus lead to a wider conflict.

26. The admission of Laos to the UN is likely to have implications for the developing situation. The Lao government, at least in the short run, may feel somewhat safer in pursuing a bold policy, believing that its access to the UN as a forum (and one potentially affording support) would be important if the Viet Minh should intervene in response to government initiated military action. The Chinese Communists, and even the Viet Minh, may be less inclined to risk world censure through large-scale intervention on behalf of the Pathet Lao.

27. On balance, we believe that, in the circumstances now existing, there will be a gradual build-up in the scale and intensity of hostilities in northern Laos over the next six months. There appears to be little likelihood of an effective cease-fire. Each side will attempt to consolidate and extend its position; but, barring unauthorized action by Laos military commanders, neither side is likely to launch a large-scale offensive. There will probably be an increase in the size of the forces involved, including increased Viet Minh support of the Pathet Lao. In this case, almost as much as in that described in paragraph 18, there would be serious danger of sizeable Lao forces being cut off and captured by more experienced Pathet-Viet Minh formations. The government might then feel compelled to request military assistance from SEATO or the US to maintain its position in the disputed provinces and to prevent a decline in anti-Pathet resolution throughout Laos.

28. If increased military action led to a defeat for Royal government forces or their ejection from the disputed provinces, morale in the rest of Laos, particularly in government circles, would decline. The Thai might feel that failure to suppress the Pathet was due in part to indecision by the US; and, barring a US security commitment, concern over their own security would increase. South Vietnamese apprehensions would also increase, although Diem would feel that Communist violations of the Geneva Agreements would reduce foreign criticism of his refusal to discuss elections with the Viet Minh. India's acquiescence in the de facto partitioning of Laos might be interpreted by the Communists as evidence that Nehru was unwilling to make an issue of gradual Communist advances in Southeast Asia. The Communists and some Southeast Asian governments would also tend to conclude that SEATO was not prepared to act.

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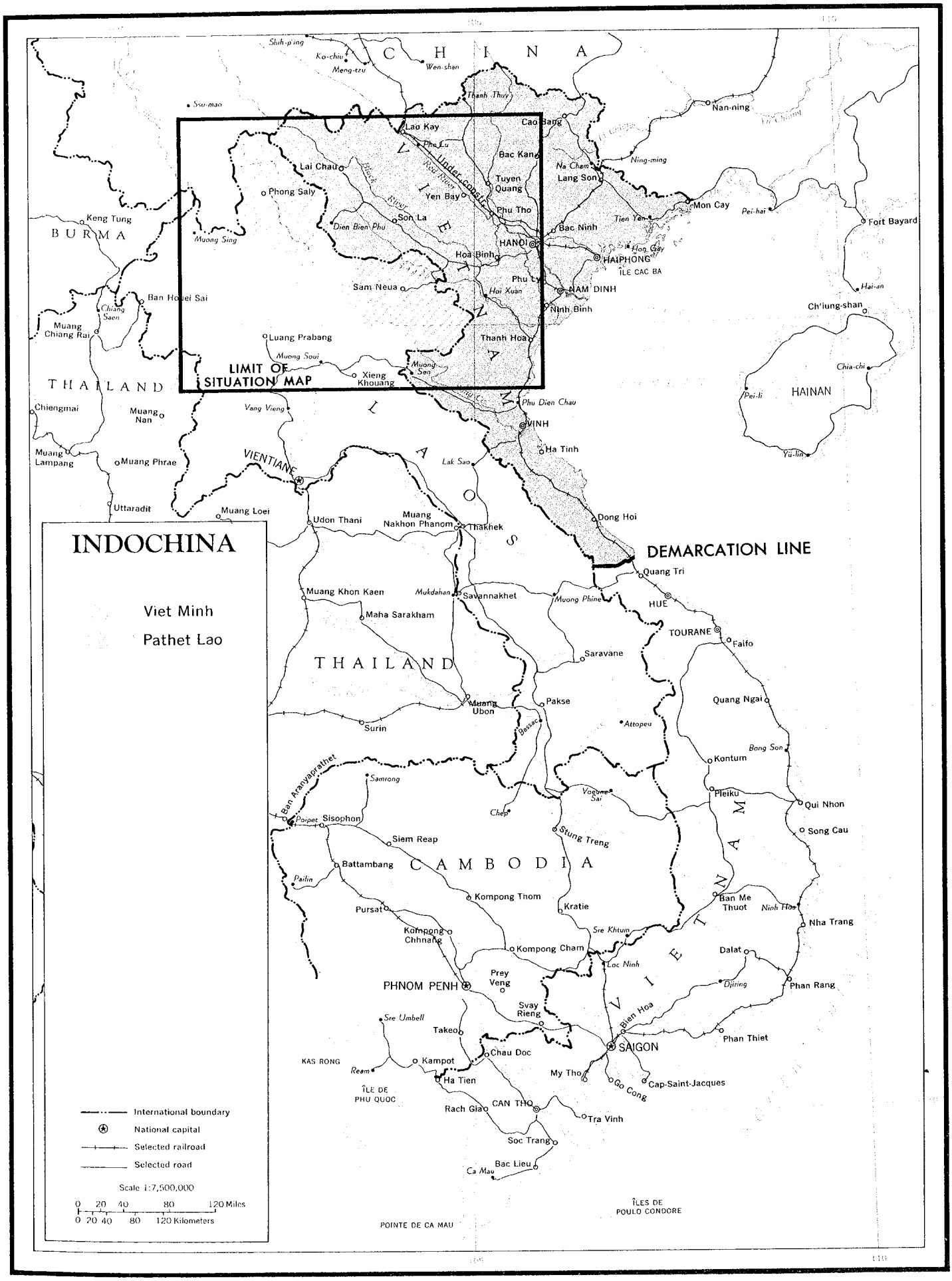
INDOCHINA
Viet Minh
Pathet Lao
LIMIT OF SITUATION MAP
DEMARCATION LINE
CHINA
BURMA
THAILAND
LAOS
CAMBODIA
VIETNAM
HAINAN
Shih-p'ing
Ko-chiu
Meng-tzu
Wen-shan
Ssu-mao
Thanh Thuy
Nan-ning
Lao Kay
Cao Bang
Phe Lu
Bac Kang
Lai Chau
Tuyen Quang
Na Cham
Lang Son
Ning-ming
Phong Saly
Yen Bay
Phu Tho
Mon Cay
Pei-hai
Fort Bayard
Keng Tung
Muong Sing
Dien Bien Phu
Son La
Bac Ninh
Tien Yen
HANOI
Hon Gay
HAIPHONG
ÎLE CAC BA
Hoa Binh
Phu Ly
NAM DINH
Hai-an
Ch'iung-shan
Ban Houei Sai
Chiang Saen
Muang Chiang Rai
Sam Neua
Hoi Xuan
Ninh Binh
Luang Prabang
Thanh Hoa
Muong Soui
Muong Sen
Xieng Khouang
Chia-chi
Pei-li
Yu-lin
Chiengmai
Muang Nan
Vang Vieng
Phu Dien Chau
VINH
Muang Lampang
Muang Phrae
VIENTIANE
Lak Sao
Ha Tinh
Uttaradit
Muang Loei
Udon Thani
Muang Nakhon Phanom
Thakhek
Dong Hoi
Quang Tri
Muang Khon Kaen
Mukdahan
Savannakhet
Muong Phine
HUE
Maha Sarakham
TOURANE
Faifo
Saravane
Quang Ngai
Muang Ubon
Pakse
Surin
Attopeu
Bong Son
Kontum
Samrong
Ban Aranyaprathet
Pleiku
Qui Nhon
Poipet
Sisophon
Chep
Voeune Sai
Song Cau
Siem Reap
Stung Treng
Battambang
Pailin
Kompong Thom
Kratie
Ban Me Thuot
Ninh Hoa
Pursat
Nha Trang
Sre Khtum
Kompong Chhnang
Kompong Cham
Loc Ninh
Dalat
PHNOM PENH
Prey Veng
Djiring
Phan Rang
Svay Rieng
Sre Umbell
Bien Hoa
Takeo
Phan Thiet
SAIGON
KAS RONG
Ream
Kampot
Chau Doc
My Tho
Ha Tien
Cap-Saint-Jacques
ÎLE DE PHU QUOC
Go Cong
Rach Gia
CAN THO
Tra Vinh
Soc Trang
Bac Lieu
Ca Mau
POINTE DE CA MAU
ÎLES DE POULO CONDORE
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National capital
Selected railroad
Selected road
Scale 1:7,500,000
0 20 40 80 120 Miles
0 20 40 80 120 Kilometers

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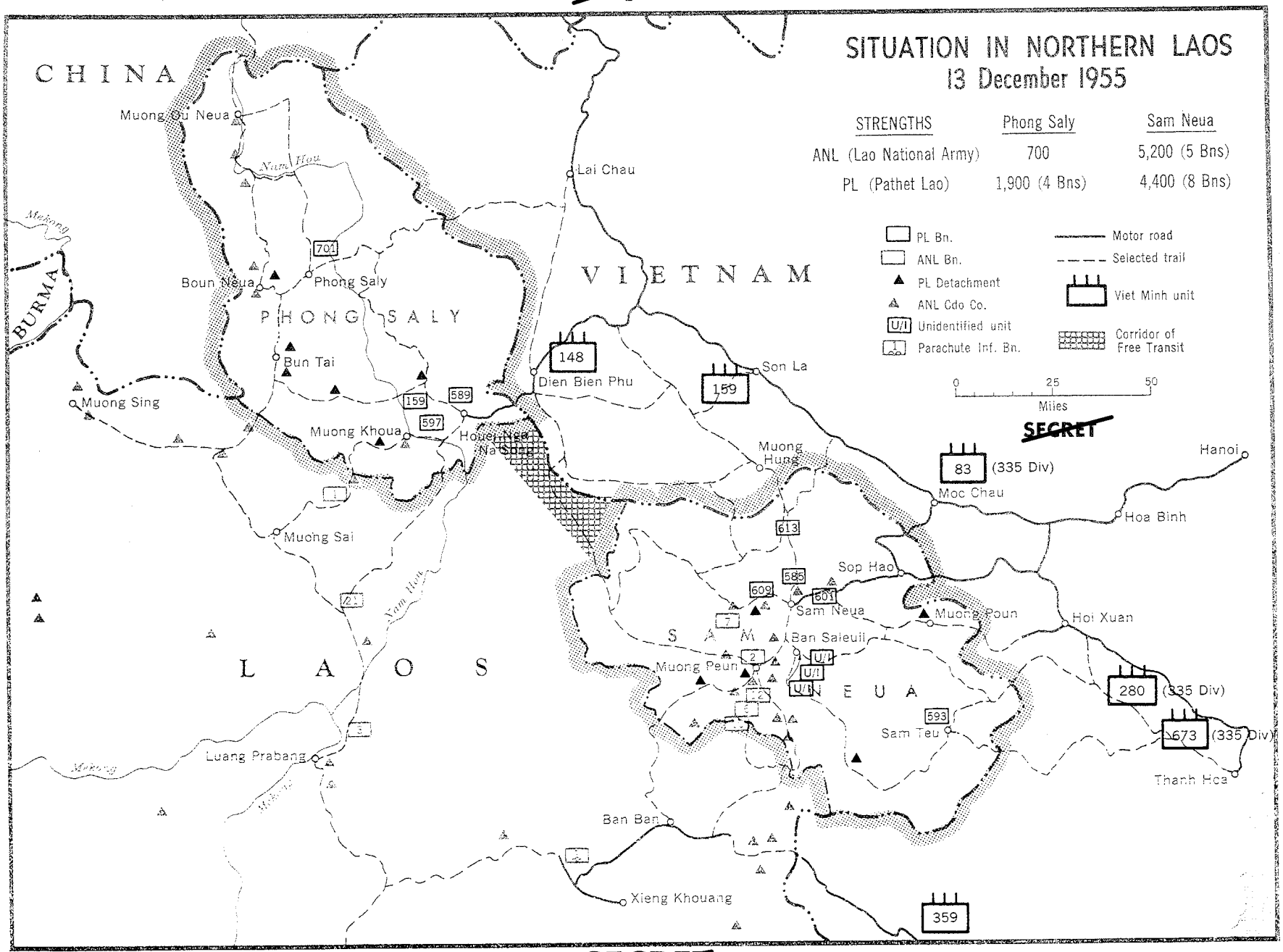

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